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Performing the reflective self: audience awareness in high-stakes reflection

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Drawing on qualitative data from 31 interviews with teachers and students in Higher Education in the UK, this article demonstrates the extent to which students, when compelled to write reflectively for assessment purposes, perform their reflective writing for at least one of three audiences: their assessment criteria; their teachers; and a general 'Other'. It shows that students are strategic and audience-aware in their reflective writing, whether or not teachers acknowledge audience as a legitimate concern, and argues that we need to welcome the concept of performance into reflective practices, and to allow reflection to take account of the addressivity of writing.

Keywords: reflection; assessment; addressivity; performance; audience

Introduction

This article presents evidence, in the form of data from qualitative research interviews, that students writing reflectively for assessment purposes, and in an online environment, are extremely audience-aware. This awareness takes three related, but distinct forms: orientation towards assessment criteria; attention to teacher presence and preferences; and sensitivity towards a general 'Other'. Awareness of audience results in a perceived loss of authenticity of reflection, and in students taking strategic approaches to reflection which are, in many cases, contrary to what teachers wish for and believe they are fostering. Furthermore, audience-awareness is a factor in assessed and compulsory reflection, which I have called 'high-stakes reflection' (Ross 2011), whether or not

teachers acknowledge it as a legitimate concern.

To suggest that students are strategic in this way is to problematise authenticity as a key rationale for including reflective writing in higher education courses and programmes. The most common critique of assessed reflection, explored in the next section, is that assessment undermines the authenticity of reflection. This article, and the evidence it presents, challenges the notion that reflective writing is ever authentic in the Heideggerian sense of ‘ownness’ or ‘mineness’ – an unmediated orientation to the self (Carman 2009). While I am arguing against an uncritical approach to assessing reflection, I will make the case that it is a lack of criticality about the *nature of reflection*, not assessment as such, which is the main problem with these practices. Our understandings of reflection will have to change if we are to use it well in high-stakes contexts. We should interrogate the sorts of discourses that have been applied to it, and which I will show are causing problems for teachers and students.

Following on from this challenge, the article works to establish high-stakes online reflective practices within a post-foundational framework, focusing on Bakhtin’s theories of dialogue and addressivity as a route towards repositioning high-stakes reflective practices as forms of speech which need not attempt to ‘hide [their] own mechanisms’ (Foucault 1998, p.86). From a post-foundational position, it is taken as read that, as McKenna (2005) puts it, ‘relationships between addresser and addressee are inscribed with power dynamics, and that these... have an impact upon what is said or written’ (p.92). The literature around reflection is generally not written from such a position, however, so the goal in this article is to unsettle existing discourses and create a space where explicitly audience-focused performances of self can begin to be seen as possible and even desirable in a reflective practice context.

Addressivity is useful in understanding how it is that students are so audience-focused and aware. It is the theory that ‘in making meaning in language, whether in dialogue with someone else or thinking alone, we are always addressing, explicitly and implicitly, a person or people, a question or comment’ (Lillis 2001, p.43). This is because language is inextricably bound to context, a ‘territory shared’ (Voloshinov 1973, p.86). It is a social construct that, in turn, constructs the subject as speaker. Holquist (2002) says that an utterance (which can be spoken or written) is a ‘border phenomenon’ which takes place:

between speakers, and is therefore drenched in social factors. This means that the utterance is also on the border between what is said and what is not said, since, as a social phenomenon par excellence, the utterance is shaped by speakers who assume that the values of their particular community are shared, and thus do not need to be spelled out in what they say. (p.61)

Lillis (2001) describes the writing ‘voices’ of students as being informed by their multiple identities and experiences, and also ‘by the voices they are attempting to respond to’ (p.46). She describes two levels of addressivity in higher education: ‘context of culture’, which would include institutional practices, and the way that institutional values and beliefs are understood by students; and ‘context of situation’, which includes what teachers say, do and provide in written form; and how teachers’ values and beliefs are understood by students (p.47).

I will begin by setting the context of reflective writing and assessment in higher education, and the context of my research. I will then move on to describe forms of audience-awareness, drawing on data from my research, and will conclude by proposing that a richer and more generative engagement with reflection would be to work with, rather than ignore, concepts of addressivity, dialogue and performance in high-stakes reflective practices.

Reflective writing and assessment

Reflective writing is becoming a privileged mode of writing in higher education, for both pedagogic and practical reasons. On a practical level, a written record is a form of evidence of reflection (Hatton and Smith 1995; Ho and Richards 1993), and this evidence can be stored, worked with and evaluated. Pedagogically, Moon (1999) argues that reflective writing has metacognitive benefits (p. 27): writing expresses understanding and captures ideas for later consideration (p.31). Creme (2005) contrasts reflective learning journal writing with traditional academic essay writing and concludes that ‘whereas the subject matter of an essay normally comprises ideas and information ‘out there’, learning journals also encompass the student–writer: they are about “you-plus-course material”’ (p.288). Time is positively associated with successful and meaningful reflection (Clegg and Bufton 2008), and writing is seen as slowing thinking down (Moon 1999, p.31) in beneficial ways, creating ‘intellectual space for learners’ (p.79).

In constructing reflection as a process that authentically reveals a knowable self, and self-examination and self-development as the ultimate goal of such reflection, those who write about reflection in professional contexts, like Bolton (2005) and Johns (2004), offer a vision which is removed in some important ways from high-stakes reflective practices. Authors who do specifically address high-stakes reflection in formal educational contexts, on the other hand, have little enthusiasm for the practice. Several authors in recent years have explored the tensions relating to assessment of reflection, describing the normalising and constraining effects of assessment, and the difficulty of assessing reflection fairly. Creme (2005) problematises the assessment of reflection on the grounds that it kills off the very qualities that reflection is intended to foster (p.291). She suggests that reflective writing is valuable only to the extent that it

frees the writer up to experiment with self-construction, and that these experiments deserve an interested, empathetic and most importantly non-judgemental reader (p.294). Reflective writing may therefore be usefully engaged with in higher education through formative *feedback*, but not through summative (or even formative) *assessment*. Boud and Walker (1998) argue that the combination of asking students to be vulnerable *and* assessing them within the same task undermines reflection and promotes self-censorship. They claim that ‘students expect to write for assessment what they know, not reveal what they don’t know’ (p.194). In a later article, Boud (2001) rejects outright the notion that reflective journals should be directly assessed, warning of the ‘powerful influence’ assessment has ‘on what is produced and the extent to which writers can engage in critical reflection’ (p.17), a view he echoes in 2006, when he calls the marking of raw reflective journals ‘inappropriate’ (2006, p.3).

Creme (2005) makes one strong argument in favour of assessing reflection: doing so attests to the value that teachers may wish to give more personal and process-orientated forms of knowledge construction. Assessment motivates students by recognising the effort that they put in to producing these texts (p.289). Bolton (2005) suggests that, given enough clarity in assessment criteria, reflection can successfully be assessed (p.133), a position also taken by English (2001), who describes clear guidelines as the basis for ethical assessment of reflection (p.31).

Other authors are more concerned about validity than ethics in the assessment of reflection. Ixer (1999) claims that the concept of reflection lacks clarity, and that ‘we do not know enough about reflection or how its intricate and complex cognitive processes can enhance learning to be able to assess it fairly’ (p.520). Dymont and O’Connell (2011), in a paper analysing the reported quality of reflection in 11 studies in higher education, highlight the extreme variation in methods of assessing reflection and in the

reported quality of reflection itself, and recommend that the ‘academic community’ consider adopting a standard approach to assessment of reflection for both research and teaching purposes (p.92). Tummons (2011), however, maintains that there can be no such detached ‘clarity’ in reflection, and that validity must necessarily involve local, partial social and literacy practices which are ‘fuzzy and complex’, and assessment criteria need (somehow) to take account of this (p.481).

To date, the literature around reflection and assessment has been mainly conceptual, and the picture needs to be rounded out with data about how high-stakes reflective practices are being experienced and approached. The rest of this article draws on data from interviews with students and teachers in higher education programmes across the United Kingdom, and constructs a conceptual framework with which to interpret this data.

Methods

The research that informs this article was a qualitative study, undertaken from a post-structuralist perspective, involving 20 students and 12 teachers in higher education programmes in the UK. Its methodology consisted of interviewing participants to find out how they were negotiating high-stakes online reflective practices. The ultimate goal of the research was to problematise a simplistic application of humanist ideals of reflection to complex practices, and to propose how high-stakes online reflection could be theorised differently. The goal in my interviews was therefore to get a picture of the complexity of these practices and the ways that students and teachers took up, rejected and reframed the various discourses of reflection available to them.

I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews in total (two lecturers were interviewed together), between May 2008 and June 2009. I worked with ‘constellations’

of students and teachers, with each 'constellation' consisting of one or more teachers and two or more students from a single academic programme. Interviewing both students and teachers from the programmes involved provided a context of practice in which to situate the data that was generated. In the end I had six such constellations, plus another three teachers from two additional programmes who had insights into assessing online reflection. All the disciplines from which the constellations were drawn are professional or vocational, which appears to reflect the state of reflective practice at the moment in higher education in the UK (Strivens *et al.* 2009).

Participating programmes were engaged in high-stakes online reflection in a higher education context at the time of the research, and were not in their first year of doing so. I wanted participants to have been through at least one cycle of assessing reflection, so that they would have views about the whole process, and also to ensure I was involving people who were continuing to assess online reflection because either they had to, or at some level they felt it had worked.

Four of the universities involved in my study were based in England, and the other four in Scotland. I spoke with 14 female and 6 male students, and 9 female and 3 male teachers. The cultural backgrounds of participants was mainly English or Scottish, but I also spoke with students from Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and the Ukraine.

My goal in conducting this research was to understand how students and teachers negotiated and made sense of the reflective practices they were engaged in, and a semi-structured interview allowed for both a focus on the issues of importance to me, and a flexibility in following the interests and impressions of interviewees. I was also able to adapt my questions to the particular context of each programme, discipline, and use of technology, which was very helpful in getting a more detailed picture of the interplay of these three factors. I adopted what I see as the key features of the semi-

structured approach: allowing both the researcher and the interviewee to shape the structure and direction of the interview; improvising questions, prompts and probes as appropriate; and being prepared to reorder questions to take account of the interview's momentum. The interviews were fairly conversational and informal in style, and each one took its own particular path. I asked for clarification and asked new questions depending on what was being said.

As Wengraf (2001) notes, semi-structured interviewing, while being aimed at “exploring the subjective world of the interviewee”, is not uncritical (p.28), and there is a balance to be struck between demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of what interviewees say, and being challenging. In addition, research processes such as interviewing and transcribing (Ross 2010) produce texts through relations of power that are both intriguing and, especially if unrecognised, problematic. Knowledge, subjectivity and language are intimately entwined – not unidirectional, but symbiotic. So, in research terms, a post-structuralist epistemology undermines goals of ‘knowing’ experience. The researcher should be wary of claiming to represent ‘the truth’ of individual experiences, because: “there is no clear window into the inner life of a person, for any window is always filtered through the glaze of language, signs and the process of signification” (Denzin 1989, p.14). As a result, as Clough (2002) puts it, “the researcher’s struggle... is not primarily with method” (p.85).

This becomes particularly apparent when discussing the thematic analysis approach that I took. I understand thematic analysis as a method assemblage – Law’s (2004) term for the ways in which we enact “presence, manifest absence, and absence as Otherness” (p.84) in our knowledge-making and research practices. For Law, method assemblages “necessarily craft complexities and simplifications”. Rather than identifying ‘signals’ amongst ‘noise’, we create both the signal and the silence (p.110).

Our methods allow us to avoid being “dazzled” by complexity, by foregrounding some things by “very selectively attending to, amplifying, and so manifesting, possible patterns” (*ibid*). Law describes interviews in an ethnographic study he conducted as containing “limitless possible patterns of similarity and difference” (*ibid*), and the process of analysis as necessary reduction, not discovery.

My approach to thematic analysis was similar to that described by King and Horrocks (2010), who define themes as: ‘recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question’ (p.150). Like Law, they stress that the researcher’s vision informs how themes are identified and developed. Themes are not “like a fossil in a rock” (*ibid*, p.149) waiting to be discovered. The successive stages of thematic analysis are, in a sense, the process of fossilising the themes that have been named. For this reason, thematic analysis is open to the same sort of scrutiny, and to questions about validity, as other analytic strategies. This is not a problem, rather it is an opportunity to ask those questions and to consider again and again, as Crotty (1998) puts it, what store we want others to set by our findings (p.41).

What store, then, do I want readers to set by my findings? My main hope is that they find the stories I am about to tell “good things to think with” (Lather 2006, p.35). In what follows, the theme of audience awareness is explored in detail, and used to develop my argument about addressivity and reflective practices. Interview data has been anonymised through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of information such as names of institutions and references to particular professional contexts.

‘I was writing for the person who was going to mark it’: demands of assessment

This part of the article demonstrates the extent to which students are orientated towards the assessment of their reflections, and how this orientation affects how they, and their teachers, think about and describe their writing.

The content, timing and extent of assessment varied between the programmes participating in my research. Almost all, however, assessed online reflective writing as developed over time, usually over the whole period of a course, and the material to be assessed was presented in web-based blog or e-portfolio format. In one case, reflection was expected throughout the course but only assessed as part of written assignments staggered through the course.

Assessment criteria also varied from programme to programme in the amount of detail and clarity they provided about the process of reflection. The examples teachers shared with me for this project all mentioned the necessity of recording development. How this was to be achieved was less clear in most cases, and students experienced the demands of writing for assessment differently depending on their level of confidence in what was required of them.

Where students were clear about assessment criteria, and secure about how they would be applied, the assessment of high-stakes reflection could be seen to be quite straightforward. Eileen had a sense, after two years, of having cracked the formula:

What are they looking for? They’re looking to show that you’ve, you’ve developed and that you recognise that you’ve developed, so that you can say ‘This is where I was and this is the way that I’ve gone or the paths that I’ve travelled and the hurdles I’ve jumped over, to get to where I am now’.
(Eileen, undergraduate student)

Eileen knew that the story of development was paramount, that it must include hurdles, choices and journeys, but ultimately must show positive progress. This is the

paradoxical nature of compulsory reflection that both Hargreaves (2004) and Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) have identified: the strategic practices that academic writing demands construct reflection as a story or a game, even while the content is supposed to be individual and confessional.

Along with the general expectation that reflection would tell a story of personal and/or professional development, there were also more specific requirements that shaped and defined what must be produced. Helen noted that her hierarchy of audience had the marker at the top, with their criteria and structure taking precedence over her own desires: 'I was writing for the person who was going to mark it. Um second to that I was writing for me. ...we had to do it in [certain] headings which certainly didn't fit terribly well in a lot of cases with what I wanted to write' (Helen, postgraduate student). Helen depicts an active choice here, a modification of what she wanted to write to fit the parameters set out for her. Beth described experiencing less agency, and no particular sense of a thwarted desire, in her framing of reflection on her course as part of a box-ticking exercise:

It's another tick box thing for uni, um, simple as. ...I've been on courses before, different ones, and there's always something, there's always tick boxes. There's always things that you feel like's a tick box exercise, there's always something on a course that you feel like 'Do I have to do this?' you know 'What is the point?' it's, um and you have to do it because it's down on the curriculum, that's just what, you just have to do it, there's no point arguing about it. And this is just another thing, um, it's just another thing on another course that they need you to do and you have to do it and, it's as simple as that. (Beth, undergraduate student)

This is difficult to reconcile with the lively, personal, and above all *critical* practice that teachers on Beth's programme, including Natalie, were trying to foster through the use of reflection:

I think reflective writing helps you as an individual, to begin to put things into perspective. Um, I think it could begin to help you, as an individual, make sense of things. Um, but I also think it could help you in beginning to see a way forward, um, so [pause] but that would be looking at reflective writing

in, um, a an analytical critical way. (Natalie, teacher, undergraduate programme)

Where Natalie saw individuality, perspective, development and analysis as potential outcomes of the reflective process, Beth seemed adamant that, in the high-stakes context, it amounted to no more than a ‘tick box thing for uni’. Natalie herself seemed to recognise this outcome for some students: ‘some of [the e-portfolios] are amazing, and others I just think “You’re just going through the motions. And you were going through the motions last year and the year before, so actually what have you learnt?”’ (Natalie, teacher, undergraduate programme). There is sometimes a stark contrast between what teachers want from reflection and what students are able or willing to produce for assessment.

Moreover, where students are less clear about what is expected of them, assessment can be seen as fickle or unpredictable. I asked Yvonne if she knew how to do the kind of reflection her teachers wanted, and she replied:

No not really. With my portfolio I’ve always kind of, I’ve never really understand, understood the marking for that, because I’ve had one year, um, where I hadn’t tried all that hard with it and I got a decent mark, and then another year, when I actually tried really hard, I did loads of [reflections] and tried to reflect on lots of things and I didn’t do so well that year. So I didn’t really understand the whole marking criteria for that or how it worked or anything so that did confuse me. So I’m not too sure how I’ll do with this, one that I just sent in. (Yvonne, undergraduate student)

Yvonne went on to say that she knows if her reflections are good only after she receives a mark for them. Lillis (2001) reports exactly the same types of responses from students in relation to writing for assessment, describing a dominant ‘practice of mystery’ (p.74) surrounding academic essay writing in higher education. Reflective writing is no less mysterious if its strategic nature, audience focus and tacit requirements are not grasped by students.

Many students and teachers describe the end of the process as the point at which assessment becomes an explicit, acknowledged audience, when students focus on the assessment criteria and review what they have created in preparation for submission. For some students, this meant ‘tidying’ aspects of the reflections that were seen as unsuitable for assessment. As Beth put it, ‘I just kind save, save the [items] through the year and then, towards the end, that’s when I kind of tidy it up’. Hazel (postgraduate student) described making her reflections ‘much more structured, not so much waffle’ before submitting them for assessment.

Bob was matter-of-fact about what his students are required to do, and where their concerns naturally lie. It is the summative, not the reflective, nature of the portfolio task that carries the day:

Jen: Do you think that, um, students kind of enjoy doing reflection, and enjoy doing their portfolios?

Bob (teacher, postgraduate programme): Eh, [laughs], I think, probably, the better question here is do they enjoy doing summatively assessed work?

Indeed, whether or not teachers acknowledge the legitimacy of the position, marks matter greatly to students, and shape their choices in complex and sometimes counterintuitive ways. Alex, for example, discussed choosing not to edit his reflections at all because, he explained, he thought it would demonstrate his journey better, both for himself reading it back, and for his assessor:

I didn’t think that assessment wise it would benefit from [editing] cause I thought that it, that the assessment would probably include whether there was a journey as well, well maybe not directly but I think, it wasn’t being assessed as a finished work, it was being assessed as a diary, my reflective work, so it doesn’t really make sense to edit what you thought at the time cause that’s still valid. (Alex, postgraduate student)

For Hazel, aiming for a distinction was the driving force behind her willingness to devote a lot of time to ‘picking apart’ her reflective writing:

I ended up putting myself under an awful lot of pressure to try and get a distinction... I did pick it apart, you know, really carefully to make sure I was doing what, what [the instructions] said. (Hazel, postgraduate student)

The strategic decisions that students make in order to do well in assessment terms often move them away from the stated aims of reflective practice. On Mona's programme, for example, peer sharing of portfolios and reflections was actively promoted as an important part of the learning process. Mona described the peer sharing elements as problematic because of a concern that peers would use creative elements of her portfolio as 'inspiration', as she put it: 'it's hard work, so ...you want to get credit for what you, if you've done something better than others':

we've been told to link into videos if you want to, but then you, you've got to pick the right one, and, and then, seeing it somewhere else might not be, you know, used by someone else it's difficult to say who was first.... Eh, so nobody's going to get the credit... [laughs] (Mona, postgraduate student)

Mona knew that she should be understanding peer sharing practices as beneficial, and that her personal reflections would be the basis upon which she is assessed. The web format in particular, though, allows creative expression of individuality, and it was not clear to Mona that this individuality shouldn't, or didn't, 'count' in assessment terms.

At the extreme end of this strategic practice, Wendy gave two examples of students who had been caught plagiarising their reflective writing. In one instance, a student copied reflections from his girlfriend, who had taken the same course the year before. In the other, two students had submitted virtually identical reflective statements in the same year (one having previously helped the other edit their work). In disregarding the core principle of reflective writing – that it *reflects* an individual's learning – these students show that a completely impersonal approach to assessed reflection is possible. Reflective writing is like any other kind of academic writing in this sense; those who are willing or desperate enough can find ways to 'cheat' the

system. Of course such cheating is undoubtedly rare. The broader point is that a reflective performance need have little or no relation to a ‘personal-confessional’ (Bleakley 2000) self. Or it may, as in Alex’s case, mean choosing to *perform* an authentic journey. Regardless, for most students, a high-stakes reflective performance will have elements of strategy woven in. What separates a ‘good’ performance from a ‘bad’ one is the seamlessness or invisibility of those elements, not their absence.

Performative rhetorical strategies position reflection as a route to self development, and as a means of revealing an authentic self. However, in their analysis of the rhetorical strategies of professional development, Edwards and Nicoll (2006) argue that models, theories and so-called common-sense understandings of reflection often ignore the “intertextual and interdiscursive practices that make it possible” (p.123). They propose to view reflection as a “language game” that privileges the idea of language as transparent (*ibid*). The problem with this game is that it does not often allow for the performance, or the sorts of sophisticated literacy practices that students engage in, to be acknowledged, explored, played with or pushed at. This produces anxiety, uncertainty and calculation, which affects not only students’ orientation towards assessment, but also towards their relationships with their teachers.

‘Didn’t I make more impression than that?’: teacher as audience

The individual personalities and preferences of teachers came strongly into play in students’ accounts of their reflective writing. Kate was criticised by a tutor in an early (summatively assessed) reflective account for being too negative, and changed her approach considerably in response, even though she did not agree with the tutor’s interpretation of the assessment criteria, and felt she had to ‘sell’ a false vision of herself:

When it came to my final reflection, I made sure it was positive the way through. I wasn't going to write anything that might have been too much of a weakness or anything, cause I didn't want to make that mistake again! So I was being influenced by the way the previous one had been marked. ...I felt as though I was trying to sell my development and prove that I had developed massively when, perhaps, I hadn't. And I think it would be just as valuable for me to say 'this particular thing, I haven't developed very well, because, but this is how I could develop it' and that's how I understood reflective writing to be. (Kate, postgraduate student)

Josie explained how writing for a series of three different tutors affected her reflection:

Different tutors, you see, have different expectations as well, which is quite difficult. ...what one tutor was looking for, wasn't what somebody else was looking for. ... So it was quite difficult at times to, "Okay, so who am I writing to today, cause that's what they like?" [laugh] (Josie, postgraduate student)

Josie took on board the feedback she received from each of these tutors, and used it to inform her subsequent reflective entries. She recognised that her reflections were not straightforwardly authentic accounts, but were shaped according to her audience.

The teacher in their role as mentor or assessor of reflective writing was also recognised, by both students and teachers, as potentially vulnerable to implied or explicit criticism of their teaching. Eileen (undergraduate student) thought teachers might not be able to help responding negatively to critical reflections on the nature of their courses, because 'nobody likes criticism, do they?'. And Ian confirmed, from a teacher's perspective, that students' reflective writing could sometimes make teachers feel criticised, and expressed a worry that this could affect their assessment:

It's a very real issue of the tendency, when you're marking something, if you're marking some, somebody who's being upbeat and positive and saying "Yeah, the course worked well, I did well, I felt good". You've a tendency to feel good about that and give them good marks. Versus the tendency to somebody who's being very critical and saying they didn't really get anything out of the course and this is the reason why, and what, blah, blah blah – you give them not so good marks because they leave you feeling a bit depressed. (Ian, teacher, postgraduate programme)

There is arguably no such thing as ‘impartial’ assessment, but what is different about assessing reflection is that the material being marked can relate explicitly to teachers’ own choices and practices. Students are aware of the human being performing the teacher’s role, and are careful not to bruise the human ego wielding the power of assessment.

On several of the programmes in my research, students received written formative feedback in the form of comments from their teachers on their blogs or e-portfolios during their course(s), separate from the summative assessment that generally came at the end of a course or semester. Teachers could access students’ reflections at any time, only leaving a trace when they chose to comment, and comments could come fairly regularly, very sporadically, or, in one case in particular, only in response to specific student requests for engagement and feedback. In these situations, where the teacher may, at any point, speak back in response to student reflections, silence becomes synonymous with absence for some students:

If you were if you were speaking your blog to a person and they nodded, that would at least give you some indication that they were present. Um whereas if you’re writing a blog and you get nothing back [pause] it’s like you’ve spoken into a vacuum. (Alex, postgraduate student)

Student reaction to this silence can be quite extreme:

This kind of kind of dependency like one gets hooked on cigarettes or something [laughter], one kind of gets hooked on the tutor and thought, you know, “oh, why is she taking so long to mark this?”, you know “why aren’t I getting any feedback now?”, and it wasn’t long at all! ... “oh, she’s forgotten about me, oh that’s a real shame”. “Oh, didn’t I make more impression than that?” [laugh] (Charles, postgraduate student)

To be responded to is to know one is seen. Where an audience could, but doesn’t, respond, the result, as for Charles, can be disorientating and distracting from the stated purpose of the reflective task, causing students to focus instead on what might get their audience’s attention. Even when students are aware of teachers’ time constraints and

know that their silence is very likely not personal, some were negatively affected by this space of possibility that was not realised:

*We were told “share this item with your tutor, share this with your tutor” and you ex-, I think it said “your tutor’s not obliged to, um, respond to these”. So then you think well, if you’re sharing them, you know, what else do you expect? ...I mean, I know they have a lot of people to tutor, but it would, yeah, I think I would have preferred more [comments] than, than I had received.
(Kate, postgraduate student)*

Kate’s assumption that a requirement to share, on her part, should be met by an obligation on the teacher’s part to respond, exposes a tension which seems to be inherent in high-stakes reflective practices online: teachers and course developers design an element of surveillance and compulsion into reflective tasks to ensure that students engage in them, but are unable to give enough feedback to make students feel like their time and effort has been fully appreciated, and that they have been responded to as individuals. This matters especially in these sorts of practices because they ask students to be very personal, and to reflect on matters of professional and academic significance, and students therefore want a personal response. Where reflection constitutes a large percentage of marks for a course or programme (50% was the maximum for any of the courses in this research), students can shore themselves up to wait for that reward. In some cases, though, the mismatch can lead to feelings of bitterness or anxiety, and a disengagement from the process.

Other students, like Lynne, creatively construct tutor *presence* from silence, rather than assuming absence, and proceed *as if* their reflections are being read even if they do not know for sure. Lynne described her teacher’s perceived presence as motivating:

*Jen: Did you feel like [your tutor] was reading everything you were writing, did you?
Lynne (postgraduate student): I, I chose to believe that she was reading it.
[laughter]*

Jen: Okay. And did that help to motivate you?

Lynne: That was definitely motivating. Yeah. Yeah definitely.

Lynne made her own supporting structure, through the figure of the teacher, to help her stay focused and on task. Lynne's teacher was a notional audience *even when silent*. Nothing that Lynne wrote was out of bounds for the gaze of her teacher; her perceived presence was at the heart of Lynne's writing.

Adele made a related comment, describing online reflection as much like offline writing in that 'once you've submitted it you've submitted it you can't change it again'. In effect, for Adele, her teacher's gaze fixed her reflective writing and made it complete. I followed up on this, pointing out that technically the online work could be edited, but Adele replied:

Once [my tutor's] read it there's no point editing it, because, because, yeah maybe in that, you were asking me about ownership, maybe in that sense it's not really mine because, um, I did feel once she's read it then, um, there's no point ...in changing it again. (Adele, postgraduate student)

For Adele, there was no longer any work to be done on her reflective writing once it had been seen by her teacher in a formative capacity; the audience was presented with the writing, and once presented, the writing was no longer available as a work in progress.

The influence that teachers can have in reflective practice contexts is considerable, especially online, where their panoptic gaze is much more strongly felt because they can observe unseen. What Lynne and Adele say here goes beyond caution, though, to an implicit Other to whom their words are spoken. This general, unseen Other is at the heart of the concept of addressivity, and will be explored further in the closing section of this article.

Addressivity and the place of the Other: restaging performance

This article has demonstrated that students do experience their high-stakes online

reflection in terms of audience and performance. The question is, what (if anything) do their teachers, and should we, make of this? What outcomes could emerge from such practices if they were more critical and creative about their relation to audience?

Bakhtin (1986) discusses the ‘nuances of style’ that differ according to the ‘personal proximity of the addressee to the speaker’ (p.96). He describes intimate genres, which are produced in an ‘atmosphere of profound trust’ in the addressee’s ‘sympathy, sensitivity, and goodwill’ (p.97). This is the genre of writing that reflection is designed to foster, where the presence of the facilitator (in this case, the teacher) is ‘to create a climate of trust and safety in which confessions can be made and catharsis enhanced’ (Bleakley 2000, p.14). However, this is not the kind of writing that students *can* produce, because even where compulsory reflection produces apparent revelations of interiority, these are ‘products of the genre itself, where identities are constructed through confessional modes, rather than confessional modes revealing identities’ (Bleakley 2000, p.16). There is no ‘there’ there, in other words; when teachers say they want expressions of authentic selves, they are asking for a performance. The result of denying the performative nature of reflective writing is writing which is:

starved of its possibilities, anaesthetised or dulled, unable to find a plurality of aesthetic voices through metaphor, image, allegory; and unable to exercise itself as a dialogic imagination that would offer a world-orientation and communal practice. (p.19)

In fact, what students will produce in the absence of strategies for working with performance may be more like what Bakhtin (1986) terms ‘objectively neutral’ genres – which ‘presuppose something like a... unity of viewpoints, but this identity and unity are purchased at the price of almost complete forfeiture of expression’ (p.98).

At least some students understand their practices in this way, explaining that writing for any audience at all results in a perceived loss of honesty or openness: ‘you’re never going to be quite as honest as you are if nobody’s going to read it’ (Adele,

postgraduate student). Adele sees an internal or self-directed monologue as the ideal in reflection, perhaps in a similar way to what Fendler (2003) describes as a cultural feminist position, where ‘some inner self remains untouched by social domination and exempt from the effects of existing power relations’ (p.20). Such an idealising of the inner self is so central to the idea of reflection that it can be difficult for students and teachers to work creatively and critically with issues of audience in reflective writing. The notion of authenticity is disturbed by an explicit recognition of addressivity, and other values and theoretical frameworks are not on offer. As a result, students feel they must be seen, above all, to be authentic in their reflections, and this, paradoxically, is hampering their understanding of and engagement with a challenging mode of writing.

It may be more appropriate to work *with* the addressivity of online reflection, than to ignore it and leave students to deal unsupported with conflicting messages about authenticity and audience. Some of the teachers I spoke with frame their assessment practice in ways that could complement an addressive approach to reflective writing. Penny (teacher, postgraduate programme), in our discussion of how to do well in assessed reflection, introduced the idea of ‘enculturating’ her students into writing reflectively, a process of induction into a specific ‘writing culture’, with its own particular norms and structures. While Penny appears to see this enculturation as a legitimate goal of high-stakes reflective practice, she went on to note that it was largely a tacit one on her course. It is not always clear to students that they are being asked to engage with a genre of writing, or what the genre entails.

Jane sees reflection as a student’s construction of an idea of themselves, not an expression of an essential, autonomous identity, and tries to make her assessment practices support that *constructing*, not *revealing*, task. In that distinction is an opening

to a way of thinking about reflection that leaves room for an understanding of power, of addressivity and of flexibility of identity work:

I certainly don't believe you know in, that there's an essential kind of self or an essential identity that they're expressing unproblematically in the weblog. They're constructing... an idea of themselves through their reflective writing about the content of the course. Um, and I think it's really important that they, that they know on what basis that is going to be assessed. So when students ask 'am I doing this right?', I always refer back to the assessment criteria... that might seem a bit sort of instrumental and not very kind of, human [laugh], but I think it's the only fair way to do it. (Jane, teacher, postgraduate programme)

Student-writers are writing to be seen, to produce an image of themselves and to engage their audience. As teachers, we should help them produce reflection that acknowledges the audience(s) for their work, and crafts the work explicitly towards those audiences. Authenticity should be seen as an aesthetic rather than a narrative gesture. Reflective accounts need to be knowing about the craft and context of their production; and concern with aesthetic dimensions of reflection can have a broadening and contextualising effect:

The locus for reflection is then not “in” the individual (decontextualised), but “in” the total event, involving the embedding of act in a context that itself guides or moulds the act. Importantly, the reflective act can then be framed as a sensitivity – an aesthetic event rather than a functional or technical adjustment. (Bleakley 1999, p.324)

Online reflection in particular offers new possibilities for aesthetic practices. It offers the screen as a surface where multimodality, hypertextuality and bricolage can be played out, and where dialogue can be foregrounded. It also shows how audience might be able to be wider than teachers may have previously assumed possible. Bringing students together in their online reflective spaces produces new kinds of discourse (Hughes and Purnell 2008), and can solve a number of problems about addressivity, by providing students with an unavoidable understanding of the visibility of what they are

producing. They, and we, require such understanding in order to rethink and rehabilitate high-stakes reflective practices in higher education.

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